

Pandemic Responses from the Executive Presbyter

June 1, 2020

We Are in This Together! Where have we seen God in this pandemic?

We have seen the grace of our God as we live out the gospel of Jesus Christ not only in our specific locations, but in our region and in our presbytery. Tangible evidence of God's grace and work is seen in all the many ways that we continued to love and serve Jesus Christ during this unusual season of pandemic including the following:

- Providing caring for those shouldering responsibility for congregations
- Networking, while remaining distant, through online gatherings
- Facilitating and disseminating both technical and pastoral resources
- Creative adaptations to organizational structures despite challenges
- Examination and Calling of a new pastor in one of our congregations
- Resourcing the various PNC's and Sessions in pastoral searches
- Specialized individual consulting and coaching with pastoral leadership
- Supportive engagement of missions, whether PSC or South Sudan
- Preparation and certification of a new candidate for ministry
- Trained authorized preachers added for congregations in need

There are times that we can begin to "take for granted" our integral connections with one another in this part of the body of Christ. We assume that the support, resources and assistance that result from our shared commitment to ministry and mission have always been and will always be. Yet, the reality is far different.

During this pandemic season, I believe we have discovered anew just how important our connections are to one another. The Presbytery of Redstone fulfills its priorities of *Engaging Congregations, Equipping Leadership, Enabling Ministry Networks and Empowering Mission Partnership* through the active support of individuals and congregations who understand the necessity and vitality of this partnership.

With this pandemic "pause," each of us have had to evaluate how we will go forward. This has included our stewardship of existing financial resources. As a presbytery, we have continued to act responsibly in controlling our expenditures at or below our actual income. Yet, this has come with some sacrifice in our shared ministry and our shared mission, impacting not only our local ministries but mission we support together around the world.

In recent months, our anticipated income has fallen far short of projections. As a result, I would prayerfully ask for your consideration not only in fulfilling existing pledges but also in any additional gifts for our shared ministry and mission at this time. Your contributions as churches or individuals permit this vital ministry to pastors, to sessions, to congregations, and to our mission partners to be sustained during this critical period.

Please join us as we partner together on behalf of the ministry of Jesus Christ in our region. Pledges and offerings may be contributed online (www.redstonepresbytery.org) or sent to the bookkeeper at:

Presbytery of Redstone, 1004 Mt. Pleasant Road, Greensburg, PA 15601

We give thanks for God's gracious provision to this ministry over the many years. Since 1781, when this new presbytery was organized, to serve the people and congregations of this region of western Pennsylvania, the Lord has graciously provided for the serving of people and congregations through the sharing in resources of God's people. Trusting in God's providence and your support, we believe that our

God will see us through these times. We thank you in advance for your willingness to support God's work among us.

Blessings.
Skip Noftzger

Executive Presbyter

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May 23, 2020

As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable ... If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. – 1 Corinthians 12:20-22, 26-27

Through these past weeks, I have been impressed by the various ways that you and your congregations have found to "Be the Church." Providing alternative expressions of corporate worship is only one of the many creative ways you have found to lead your church to respond by faith to God's grace, love and justice. We have learned (again) that the community of faith is not defined by a single in-person gathering. From our own New Testament roots, we have always known this, but the necessity of these realities has brought us this helpful reminder.

Committed to Biblical principles of the unity of the Body, we have and will need to make choices based upon the safety of all. Our identity and purposes have not been altered by this deliberate choice to abstain from in-person worship experiences. Our response to God's grace in Jesus Christ will continue to find new and creative ways to love our God and to love our neighbors. As we move through different stages of response to this pandemic, we will encounter different concerns about the ways we go forward (vs. returning to the past, which is not a viable option).

This "Yellow" phase (as it is labeled) "blinks" to us to "proceed with caution." We should "yield" based upon the safety and concerns of others around us. Even when we enter the "Green" phase at some point, the need for preparation, prudence and vigilance will remain. Without assurances of a vaccine, preventative measures will still be dependent upon our own practices and actions as individuals and as congregations. I urge you not to feel pressured by either individual feelings of frustration or fear. While we acknowledge their reality, we must seek to lead and discern faithfulness collectively on behalf of our congregations.

Not merely with the singular event of Sunday morning worship, but in considering the implications for health and safety concerns going forward in all our ministry practices. Realizing both that managing risk brings no guarantees AND that potential spread of the virus knows no boundaries, it is our responsibility to assess and discern God's leading for faithful practices for all of God's people entrusted to our care (BOO, G- 2.03). Because the conversation is ongoing and research on many of the health and safety questions continues to be refined, it is important to stay abreast of these developments.

We do not live our lives based upon fear, but we do look to the Lord for guidance and ask for wisdom that we may act faithfully based upon the information and insight that we have been given. Our desire for faithfulness must not be measured by what we "miss," but rather how our God might be served in the ways we steward our resources (time, talent and treasure) for a time such as this. May it be that we sought to follow Jesus and serve even the "least of these." As always, I stand ready to advise and assist you as we seek to honor and glorify our God in all that we do in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Blessings.

Skip Noftzger
Executive Presbyter

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May 11, 2020

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea. Psalm 46: 1-2

As we all know, our counties will move into the "yellow" phase of the Governor's plan. This revision of the "stay at home" order should not be interpreted as lifting all requirements and certainly does not relieve our responsibility to lead our congregations with wisdom and care for all of the people of our church and our communities.

In anticipation of this "phase," I had sent you previously a comprehensive document (see below May 1 entry) on the pertinent questions that should be asked/answered as well as a series of recommendations by me in ministry areas categorized by each of the three phases. If you have not already, please use this document in conversations with pastors and sessions to be discerning how we might be faithful in the ways we treat each other.

Additionally, beyond the resources that I have been providing all along (available on the website and below), I wanted to provide some other articles that I have found informative in recent days.

The Risks--Know them--Avoid them--more detailed explanation on what we are learning about transmission that transcends just the quick and easy advice of "six feet" distancing.

Cleaning and Disinfecting your Facility--CDC Guidance for Business use, but equally applicable to any public location.

Summary of the Webinar conducted on "A Conversation: What Do Science and Data Say About the Near Term Future of Singing"

Why 6 feet may not be enough social distance to avoid COVID-19--The coronavirus can spread through the air and via asymptomatic people, affecting the equation.

We do not live our lives based upon fear, but we do look to the Lord for guidance and ask for wisdom that we may act faithfully based upon the information and insight that we have been given. Our desire for faithfulness must not be measured by what we "miss," but rather how our God might be served in the ways we steward our resources (time, talent and treasure) for a time such as this. May it be that we sought to follow Jesus and serve even the least of these and the most vulnerable among us. Then, Jesus will say, come, inherit the kingdom prepared for you. Effective and faithful leadership will lead us all in that mission with those values.

I am always available to consult with you as pastor or session about the ways that we might be faithful going forward. Please do not hesitate to call or email. I will also be reaching out to you.

Please keep checking the Presbytery website and Facebook pages for resources among us about worship practices, ministry engagement, and decision-making factors.

Blessings,

Rev. Richard "Skip" Noftzger; Executive Presbyter/Stated Clerk

May 1, 2020

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea. Psalm 46:1-2

As we continue to move forward with "Being the Church," we do so under the current conditions. For some, there might have been the desire to just wait for the "blizzard" to be over, but it is our responsibility as leaders to prepare and act based not only upon the present, but the future. With the Governor's announcement today, none of the counties in Southwestern Pennsylvania were targeted to move to the "yellow" phase on May 8. So, while this could change in the near future (there is no timetable), it is imperative that we continue to both function in a sustainable manner during this "red" phase as we plan for the "yellow" and "green" phases.

In order to try to assist and resource you in this process, I have attached a document (below) that I have prepared that includes information based upon the PA Department of Health, a checklist of only some of the questions/issues that need to be addressed, some recommendations from me as the Executive Presbyter, and a bibliography of some resources. This document is intended to serve you in your own discernment and decision making as a Session for the faithful and collective good of your congregation that you shepherd.

I want to encourage you that the grace of our God is sufficient in all circumstances and that we seek to glorify God in all the creative ways we minister in God's name in our congregations and in our communities. Perhaps now, more than ever, the implications of that ordination vow to which we all affirmed..."will you pray for and seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?" So, let us look to the Lord for guidance through prayer and seek to serve God's people and God's world not just in the ways we always have, but in this "new normal."

I am always available to consult with you as pastor or session about the ways that we might be faithful going forward. Please do not hesitate to call or email. I will also be reaching out to you.

Please keep checking the Presbytery website and Facebook pages for resources among us about worship practices, ministry engagement, and decision-making factors.

Blessings,

Rev. Richard "Skip" Noftzger, Executive Presbyter/Stated Clerk

PANDEMIC DECISIONS GOING FORWARD (not backward)

Like many of you, I have observed the frustration among some within our society who have become restless with the restrictions that have been put in place. Some of these feelings are driven by personal financial uncertainty while others are the result of losing lifestyle choices that had become part of our lives. Either way, we live in a period of high stress and anxiety whether precipitated by health or financial or personal concerns. Yet, the government restrictions were imposed for the public welfare. They have and may still require some degree of personal sacrifice for the common good. The mandated policies were to have a concerted and proactive response to "flatten the curve" in order that health systems may not be overloaded with a result of even greater danger to our public health. While the recent success of these initiatives has controlled much of the spread in our immediate area, all of southwestern Pennsylvania region remain for the time being in the "Red" zone. At some point, there will be a lessening of some of the mandated restrictions through a "phased in" plan (below), based upon various benchmarks. Maybe, it will be soon or maybe not. In either case, we will need to plan ahead.

RED	YELLOW	GREEN
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Stay safe at home• Even for essential activities, keep social distance• Wear masks in public• Only tasks/travel that is essential	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Aggressive mitigation retained (distance, masks)• Work from home if possible• Restrict in person gathering <u>to less than twenty-five</u>• Schools, Gyms, Theaters closed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Follow CDC and PA Dept. of Health guidelines in work and social settings.• Aggressive mitigation lifted, but good health/safety practices retained.• Businesses permitted to return to

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only life sustaining businesses open 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retail and restaurants open with curbside or delivery preferred. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • prior practices. • Monitoring public health indicators to adjust accordingly.
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As the leadership for congregations across Redstone Presbytery, we must recognize and prepare now to assess, discern, decide, prepare and communicate (again and again) for and with our respective congregations to whom we have been called to lead. As part of that process, I have included below some documents that may assist you in this endeavor. They include:

- CHECKLIST OF PREREQUISITE QUESTIONS/ISSUES TO BE RESOLVED
- EXECUTIVE PRESBYTER RECOMMENDATIONS ON MINISTRY PRACTICES BASED UPON PHASES
- BIBLIOGRAPHY OF ARTICLES AND WEB RESOURCES THAT YOU MIGHT FIND HELPFUL AS A PASTOR AND AS A SESSION

It is important to note that the easing of mandated restrictions is not a mandate to reopen or return to prior practices (“normal”). It becomes our responsibility as leaders to make prudent and wise decisions, acknowledging that we live by faith (not fear) AND we should not tempt our God by acting foolishly. Of course, as leaders, this is more complicated than merely the decisions that you and I might make as individuals. We must discern, decide and act based upon the collective good and faithfulness of our congregations. Based upon those perspectives, I offer the enclosed documents which are grounded in the following.

- The Church is not the building, nor the expectation that ministry must take place in/through that resource.
- Ministry forms and expressions are always changing based upon contexts (even without a pandemic). These alternatives and differences neither make them inherently better nor worse.
- Decisions about the entire congregation should take into serious consideration the most vulnerable among us. In this case, the vulnerable may be based upon health concerns, but in other times and situations, there may be other forms of vulnerability (financial, emotional, physical, etc.)
- In making choices as leadership, we need to ensure that we are taking the “long term” view and not merely reacting to any given set of circumstances. We may not want to be the “early adopters” of some new fad, nor do not want to be the earliest guinea pigs in a social or health experiment.

SELECTIVE CHECKLIST FOR PREREQUISITE CONSIDERATIONS (*readiness even when various activities is permissible*)

----ASSESS, ----DISCERN, ----DECIDE, ----PREPARE, ----COMMUNICATE

Responsibilities of the Session are to be faithful to the mission of Christ in providing that: the Word of God may be truly preached and heard, the Sacraments may be rightly administered and received and Nurturing a covenant community of disciples of Christ. These responsibilities do not require or mandate a pattern or practice (even though it has been “normal”). As the leadership, how govern and guide the congregation in being and becoming a witness to God redemptive grace and mission as a community of faith, hope, love and witness.

<p>Worship and Ministry Practices Together---</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Will you offer only virtual experiences or a hybrid of in person/virtual? How would you determine who participates in which types? ○ How are the various ministries of the church being maintained through alternative means not only for the short term, but going forward? ○ How will you ensure that gathering limitations be maintained? ○ How will the room, fellowship hall, or worship area be structured in order to facilitate physical distancing? ○ How will traditional practices of greeting, ushering, bulletins, passing of the peace, offerings, sacraments, etc. be altered to ensure physical distance is maintained and paper/trays/etc. are not "passed around?" ○ How will distances at entrances/exits both at the beginning and the end of any activity be maintained? ○ How will choir (or other groups) practice or be seated during any worship experiences? ○ Will you use paper supplies (bulletins, etc.)? How will they be distributed safely? ○ Will you use hymnals (or will you project)? How will they be cleaned afterward? Will you permit families to take a “personal” hymnal home (rather than commonly used) to bring with them to worship experiences and take home to clean themselves?
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<p>Participation---</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Will only a smaller subset (musicians, etc.) gather to participate while others participate online? ○ How are leaders (whether worship, bible study, etc.) equipped to facilitate effective participation by BOTH those in person or online? ○ Will those who choose to participate be expected to come with masks? If they do not, will masks be provided, or will they be denied? ○ Will they be screened for temperatures or other symptoms?

- How will seating be structured to ensure physical distancing?
- How will those who choose not to be in-person still be able to participate without being treated as "second-class?"
- How will you seek to make sure the most vulnerable are cared for and can participate?
- Will they feel left out if you sponsor an activity that they are discouraged from participating?

Cleaning/Sanitizing---

- Is the church building adequately stocked with cleaning supplies and hand sanitizers?
- How frequently will the facilities that are used need to be cleaned thoroughly?
- Will it be cleaned both before and after? Will you need to increase hours of cleaning personnel or use outside services?
- Will the usage (which might be at different times than Sunday morning) necessitate cleaning before/after?

EXECUTIVE PRESBYTER RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Even when restrictions are not mandated, it does not mean we are mandated (or wise) to return to "normal" practices. Listed below are some of thoughts, suggestions and recommendations.

FOR WHAT IS PERMISSIBLE, NOT NECESSARILY ADVISABLE— See above	PHASE 1 (RED)	PHASE 2 (YELLOW)	PHASE 3 (GREEN)
MINISTRY AND MISSION AREAS- General	STAY SAFE AT HOME— ONLY ESSENTIAL TASKS/TRAVEL	AGGRESSIVE MITIGATION--- LIMITATION ON SOCIAL GATHERING (<25)	GOOD/NORMAL HEALTH AND SAFETY PRACTICES
WORSHIP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alternative (abstain from in person) worship experiences. • Provide means (hard copy or assistance) for those not using technological resources. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alternative worship experiences and/or provisions for limited in person who have not/cannot participate in alternative. • Provide means (hard copy or assistance) for those not using technological resources. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain and promote both/and in person and alternative worship (for those who choose or cannot participate). • Revise worship practices (in person) that could create opportunities for exposure. • Educate for the common good so that those who are sick or could be compromised feel free to participate in alternative ways.
FELLOWSHIP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alternative means for being able to connect regularly with one another. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small group gatherings in which you are able to maintain physical distance. Responsibility for post-gathering cleaning. • No common food preparation or consumption. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fellowship events that are able to be conducted in physical space that permits distancing when desired. • Preparation of food by those meeting health standards (gloves, etc.) and served (not buffet/common touching).
DISCIPLESHIP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abstain for the short 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide for multiple 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple opportunities

	term but prepare for alternative and/or hybrid options going forward.	opportunities for discipleship and formation for all ages through alternative means (technology; workbooks, etc.)	for participation in formation/discipleship (in person and/or online)
MISSION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintain mission critical activities that serve the most vulnerable in our communities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reach out to other mission-supported activities to look for opportunities to engage. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Resume mission support and engagement using health and safety protocols.
LEADERSHIP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish alternative means of participation and regular decision making that is agile and time sensitive but works toward consensus (session). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coordinate/ Communicate/ Implement any revisions in ministry practices going forward (short/long term). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ongoing communication on the new practices that will be part of the new ways we “are the Church” even when permitted to be in person.
PASTORAL CARE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide systematic pastoral care through phone contacts as everyone becomes part of the “home bound” population. Make sure congregants are aware of mental health and domestic abuse resources in your communities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Follow up with personal care for those particularly impacted by COVID-19 through death, hospitalization, job loss, etc. Make sure congregants are aware of mental health and domestic abuse resources in your communities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Scheduling of memorial services and other special experiences which have been delayed or deferred during the previous period. Make sure congregants are aware of mental health and domestic abuse resources in your communities.
ADMINISTRATIVE/ OPERATIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish clear, effective, flexible and easy ways for participants to express stewardship through contributions. Prepare health and safety protocols for future use when in person gatherings are initiated. Retain essential committee functions online. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Make available multiple ways (if not already available) for in person, mail and online giving. Implement health and safety protocols for in the office and in person gatherings. Initiate committee/ structures through hybrid(person/online) means. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evaluate necessary budget adjustments and/or special campaigns for recovery. Communicate and promote health and safety protocols throughout church facility and activities. Offer committee/ structures through hybrid means.
EMPLOYEES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Minimize the need for employees to be at work in the office/building and limit contact of visitors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Where possible permit work from home or minimize. Limit contact of visitors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Resume prior work schedules and practices but follow health and safety precautions.
WORK ENVIRONMENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintain existing health/safety guidance regarding distancing and masks. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintain existing health/safety guidance regarding distancing and 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement ongoing health and safety protocols for staff and work environment.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limit any non-essential people. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> masks. Limit any non-essential people. 	

BIBLIOGRAPHY

REDSTONE MATERIALS (www.redstonepresbytery.org; <https://www.facebook.com/PresbyteryofRedstone/>)

EP Pandemic Updates/Articles;

Online Worship Resources

Emergency Grant/Loan program

WISCONSIN COUNCIL OF CHURCHES RECOMMENDATIONS

(<https://www.wichurches.org/2020/04/23/returning-to-church/>)

PCUSA COVID-19 RESOURCES

(<https://www.pcusa.org/covid19/>)

WHAT YOUR CHURCH MUST KNOW BEFORE REOPENING (congregational survey may be helpful)

https://factsandtrends.net/2020/04/22/what-your-church-must-know-before-reopening-your-building/?fbclid=IwAR2T_xjDh_r7zf3oXT6XHiwG3MBw4OJs4UG_BzbGsTSICgt72j2yXECP19s#.XqDLq46Ah94.facebook

24 QUESTIONS YOUR CHURCH SHOULD ANSWER BEFORE PEOPLE RETURN

<https://kenbraddy.com/2020/04/18/20-questions-your-church-should-answer-before-people-return/?fbclid=IwAR1M6EL46Io-DZKd15gMo-PAp9-In-A-vRy9NwX6cFPDc92KZP4VkcWngr4>

CHURCH’S RESPONSE TO THE CORONAVIRUS (summary of Tony Morgan webinar "Unstuck Group")

<https://chriseller.net/2020/the-church-after-coronavirus>

LEADING BEYOND THE BLIZZARD

<https://journal.praxislabs.org/leading-beyond-the-blizzard-why-every-organization-is-now-a-startup-b7f32fb278ff>

10 WAYS THE CHURCH WILL BE CHANGED BY COVID-19

<https://convergenceus.org/2020/04/02/ten-ways-the-church-will-be-changed-by-covid-19/>

LEADERSHIP DURING TIMES OF CRISIS

(https://ethicalleadership.nd.edu/leading-during-times-of-crisis/?fbclid=IwAR21HaXwGy5X7770ph0FYSGO2C6HV39Ga6D0GULqeAljm2mijuZ_IHesAk)

SIX WAYS TO SHEPHERD WHEN YOU CAN’T SEE THE SHEEP

(https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2020/april/6-ways-to-shepherd-when-you-cant-see-sheep.html?fbclid=IwAR2_uD6Lx6kYje7EQ16g6_v3vq3TbfvPXehJVRryDhZVGuvCyN5iKdyjS5Y)

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April 28, 2020

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea. Psalm 46: 1-2

As the outbreak of the COVID-19 continues to grow in some areas, there are other parts of our country where certain restrictions are being lifted. In all of these difficult decisions, we have to realize these decisions are not and will not be based upon certainty of either complete elimination of the virus (vs. flattening/slowing its spread) or the necessity of complete economic restoration (vs. selectively reopening in safe ways). In our own Commonwealth, we are being advised that there will be a possible phased-in approach (after May 8) and that it will be based upon benchmarks (among them <50 cases/100,000) in particular regions.

Going forward, no doubt, there may be different guidance on limitations in different regions even within our Presbytery (Westmoreland vs. Cambria vs. Fayette vs. Somerset counties). As sessions and leaders in

congregations, we must approach the decisions that await us regarding the nature of implementing the ministries and programs with wisdom and faith, and with sensitivity to the entire congregation, particularly the most vulnerable. As those called to pray and seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love, and watching over the people as we provide for worship, nurture, and service. During this time period, we have been responsive to civil guidance and regulation, but it does not remove our responsibility to lead now and in the future. We will need to make decisions not based just upon what is permissible, but what is beneficial.

After May 8, it is possible that Governor Wolf might relax some restrictions in particular areas (moving from "red" to "yellow"). As we all know, yellow still means caution. Yellow will mean that schools will remain closed, telework will still be advised, take out and curbside pickup will still be used in retail and restaurants. Recreation and entertainment will remain closed. So, while "stay at home" may not be restricted, public gatherings will remain limited to less than twenty-five people. Decisions about the advisability even within those restrictions is still necessary based upon what is beneficial. IN ALL CASES, no matter what in-person engagements may be permissible, aggressive mitigation practices such as distancing, cleaning, and masks should continue. So, let us begin to plan accordingly, but let us not get ahead of guidance and health officials nor make decisions upon the desires of some rather than the good of all.

Meanwhile, I encourage you to continue to engage in ministry that glorifies our God and serves the congregation and our neighborhoods. We are not just holding on until we can go back, we are seeking to be faithful following the Lord Jesus Christ, not just individually, but as shepherds of particular flocks to whom God has called us.

Please keep checking the Presbytery website and Facebook pages for resources among us about worship practices, ministry engagement, and decision-making factors.

Blessings,

Skip

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April 24, 2020

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea. Psalm 46: 1-2

As the outbreak of the Covid-19 continues to grow in some areas, there are other parts of our country where certain restrictions are being lifted. In all of these difficult decisions, we have to realize these decisions are not and will not be based upon certainty of either complete elimination of the virus (vs. flattening/slowing its spread) or the necessity of complete economic restoration (vs. selectively reopening in safe ways). In our own Commonwealth, we are being advised that there will be a possible phased-in approach (after May 8) and that it will be based upon some benchmarks (among them <50 cases/100,000) in particular regions.

Going forward, no doubt, there may be different guidance on limitations in different regions even within our Presbytery (Westmoreland vs. Cambria vs. Fayette vs. Somerset counties). As sessions and leaders in congregations, we must approach the decisions that await us regarding the nature of implementing the ministries and programs with wisdom and faith, and with sensitivity to the entire congregation, particularly the most vulnerable. As those called to pray and seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence imagination and love, and watching over the people as we provide for worship, nurture and service.

During this time period, we have been responsive to civil guidance and regulation, but it does not remove our responsibility to lead now and in the future. We will need to make decisions not based just upon what is permissible, but what is beneficial.

After May 8, it is possible that Governor Wolf might (Phased reopening) relax some restrictions in particular areas (moving from "red" to "yellow"). As we all know, yellow still means caution. Yellow will mean that schools will remain closed, telework will still be advised, take out and curbside pickup will still be used in retail and restaurants.

Recreation and entertainment will remain closed. So, while "stay at home" may not be restricted, public gatherings will remain limited to less than twenty-five people. Decisions about the advisability even within those restrictions is still necessary based upon what is beneficial. IN ALL CASES, no matter what in-person engagements may be permissible, aggressive mitigation practices such as distancing, cleaning and masks should continue. So, let us begin to plan accordingly, but let us not get ahead of guidance of health officials nor make decisions upon the desires of some rather than the good of all.

Meanwhile, I encourage you to continue to engage in ministry that glorifies our God and serves the congregation and our neighborhoods. We are not just holding on until we can go back, we are seeking to be faithful following the Lord Jesus Christ, not just individually, but as shepherds of particular flocks to whom God has called us.

Please keep checking the Presbytery website and Facebook pages for resources among us about worship practices, ministry engagement, and decision-making factors.

Blessings,

Skip

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March 25, 2020

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea. Psalm 46: 1-2

As the outbreak of the Covid-19 continues to grow not only around the country, but in our region, we must be ever more vigilant in our efforts to participate in "stemming the tide" through appropriate personal and public practices. Previously, we advised abstention of in-person worship and gatherings for at least a couple weeks. **It now becomes necessary to urge our congregations and their leaders to not have in-person worship and gatherings until further notice.**

If you have not already made other plans for alternative worship, fellowship and ministry gatherings, there is a list of what various congregations in Redstone Presbytery are already doing in which you could partner and participate.

Even though we have all been doing our part, we need to continue to act now and to lead for the benefit of your congregations, your neighbors and the common good. Even though no longer gathering in public spaces, we must remain committed to Christ's mission to love one another, bear each other's burdens and to care for the "least of these" and the most vulnerable. This will be the time when the genuineness of our faith expressed in our faith communities is enacted through creative and alternative means. We have the opportunity to act prudently, wisely and selflessly and most of all to BE the CHURCH (not just a Sunday service) even with physical distancing. This is not an expression of fear or lack of faith, but rather a

demonstration that God's grace is not bound by the particular ways that we have lived out in the past.

Meanwhile, if I may be of assistance to you in any way, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Blessings,

Rev. Richard "Skip" Noftzger; Executive Presbyter/Stated Clerk

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March 17, 2020

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea. Psalm 46: 1-2

With each new day, there is greater exhortation to heed the warnings so that we might all be supportive of efforts to ensure the slowing of the spread of Covid-19. For some such precautions may appear extreme at the moment, but these are proactive measures to slow potentially exponential growth of those infected, preserving the capacity of our health care capacity and protecting older adults and those with underlying conditions. The CDC had already recommended events/activities for groups of fifty to be cancelled or postponed for eight weeks AND for smaller events, whenever possible to conduct them virtually. Yesterday afternoon, the President offered additional guidelines restricting groups no larger than ten, avoiding discretionary travel, and whenever possible engage in work and school from home. (President's Coronavirus Guidelines for America)

If your session has not heeded this advice leading up to this point, I implore you to make the gracious decision to "do your part to slow the spread of the Coronavirus." Now is the time to plan and prepare for alternative means to worship, to engage in Christian community, caring for the "least of these" and the most vulnerable and to faithfully and creatively serve our communities. Just in case, we need to plan and prepare now that these alternative approaches may need to continue beyond a couple weeks and into the Easter season. Such approaches do not reflect fear, but rather they may exhibit the ways we can and will demonstrate faith, hope and love in the midst of panic or despair. We have the opportunity to act wisely and selflessly, without seeking to test our God's sovereign protection.

Over the next few days, we will be offering a couple Zoom conversations about ministry practices in these times (below). I invite you to join with your colleagues in planning and preparing together. You may also join with colleagues nearby or online through a variety of resources posted through the Presbytery, the Synod and the PCUSA.

Tuesday--1:00 p.m.--Using Zoom, Facebook Live or (Zoom meeting)

Wednesday-4:00 p.m.---Community when we're socially distant (Christian community) Thursday--10:00 a.m.---Pastoral care that "cares" (Pastoral care)

Blessings,

Rev. Richard "Skip" Noftzger Executive
Presbyter/Stated Clerk Presbytery of Redstone